

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST OF THE ROOKES TAKES A HAND

I

Jill was hardly aware that he had asked her a question. She was suffering that momentary sense of unreality which comes to us when the years roll away and we are thrown abruptly back into the days of our childhood. The logical side of her mind was quite aware that there was nothing remarkable in the fact that Wally Mason, who had been to her all these years a boy in an Eton suit, should now present himself as a grown man. But for all that the transformation had something of the effect of a conjuring-trick. It was not only the alteration in his appearance that startled her: it was the amazing change in his personality. Wally Mason had been the *bête noire* of her childhood. She had never failed to look back at the episode of the garden-hose with the feeling that she had acted well, that--however she might have strayed in those early days from the straight and narrow path--in that one particular crisis she had done the right thing. And now she had taken an instant liking for him. Easily as she made friends, she had seldom before felt so immediately drawn to a strange man. Gone was the ancient hostility, and in its place a soothing sense of comradeship. The direct effect of this was to make Jill feel suddenly old. It was as if some link that joined her to her childhood had been

snapped.

She glanced down the Embankment. Close by, to the left, Waterloo Bridge loomed up, dark and massive against the steel-grey sky. A tram-car, full of home-bound travellers, clattered past over rails that shone with the peculiarly frost-bitten gleam that seems to herald snow. Across the river everything was dark and mysterious, except for an occasional lamp-post and the dim illumination of the wharves. It was a depressing prospect, and the thought crossed her mind that to the derelicts whose nightly resting-place was a seat on the Embankment the view must seem even bleaker than it did to herself. She gave a little shiver. Somehow this sudden severance from the old days had brought with it a forlornness. She seemed to be standing alone in a changed world.

"Cold?" said Wally Mason.

"A little."

"Let's walk."

They moved westwards. Cleopatra's Needle shot up beside them, a pointing finger. Down on the silent river below, coffin-like row-boats lay moored to the wall. Through a break in the trees the clock over the Houses of Parliament shone for an instant as if suspended in the sky, then vanished as the trees closed in. A distant barge in the

direction of Battersea wailed and was still. It had a mournful and foreboding sound. Jill shivered again. It annoyed her that she could not shake off this quite uncalled-for melancholy, but it withstood every effort. Why she should have felt that a chapter, a pleasant chapter, in the book of her life had been closed, she could not have said, but the feeling lingered.

"Correct me if I am wrong," said Wally Mason, breaking a silence that had lasted several minutes, "but you seem to me to be freezing in your tracks. Ever since I came to London I've had a habit of heading for the Embankment in times of mental stress, but perhaps the middle of winter is not quite the moment for communing with the night. The Savoy is handy, if we stop walking away from it. I think we might celebrate this re-union with a little supper, don't you?"

Jill's depression disappeared magically. Her mercurial temperament asserted itself.

"Lights!" she said. "Music!"

"And food! To an ethereal person like you that remark may seem gross, but I had no dinner."

"You poor dear! Why not?"

"Just nervousness."

"Why, of course." The interlude of the fire had caused her to forget his private and personal connection with the night's events. Her mind went back to something he had said in the theatre. "Wally--" She stopped, a little embarrassed. "I suppose I ought to call you Mr. Mason, but I've always thought of you...."

"Wally, if you please, Jill. It's not as though we were strangers. I haven't my book of etiquette with me, but I fancy that about eleven gallons of cold water down the neck constitutes an introduction. What were you going to say?"

"It was what you said to Freddie about putting up money. Did you really?"

"Put up the money for that ghastly play? I did. Every cent. It was the only way to get it put on."

"But why...? I forget what I was going to say!"

"Why did I want it put on? Well, it does seem odd, but I give you my honest word that until to-night I thought the darned thing a masterpiece. I've been writing musical comedies for the last few years, and after you've done that for a while your soul rises up within you and says, 'Come, come, my lad! You can do better than this!' That's what mine said, and I believed it. Subsequent events

have proved that Sidney the Soul was pulling my leg!"

"But--then you've lost a great deal of money?"

"The hoarded wealth, if you don't mind my being melodramatic for a moment, of a lifetime. And no honest old servitor who dangled me on his knee as a baby to come along and offer me his savings! They don't make servitors like that in America, worse luck. There is a Swedish lady who looks after my simple needs back there, but instinct tells me that, if I were to approach her on the subject of loosening up for the benefit of the young master, she would call a cop. Still, I've gained experience, which they say is just as good as cash, and I've enough money left to pay the bill, at any rate, so come along."

In the supper-room of the Savoy Hotel there was, as anticipated, food and light and music. It was still early, and the theatres had not yet emptied themselves, so that the big room was as yet but half full. Wally Mason had found a table in the corner, and proceeded to order with the concentration of a hungry man.

"Forgive my dwelling so tensely on the bill-of-fare," he said, when the waiter had gone. "You don't know what it means to one in my condition to have to choose between poulet en casserole and kidneys à la maître d'hôtel. A man's cross-roads!"

Jill smiled happily across the table at him. She could hardly believe

that this old friend with whom she had gone through the perils of the night and with whom she was now about to feast was the sinister figure that had cast a shadow on her childhood. He looked positively incapable of pulling a little girl's hair--as no doubt he was.

"You always were greedy," she commented. "Just before I turned the hose on you, I remember you had made yourself thoroughly disliked by pocketing a piece of my birthday cake."

"Do you remember that?" His eyes lit up and he smiled back at her. He had an ingratiating smile. His mouth was rather wide, and it seemed to stretch right across his face. He reminded Jill more than ever of a big, friendly dog. "I can feel it now--all squashy in my pocket, inextricably mingled with a catapult, a couple of marbles, a box of matches, and some string. I was quite the human general store in those days. Which reminds me that we have been some time settling down to an exchange of our childish reminiscences, haven't we?"

"I've been trying to realize that you are Wally Mason. You have altered so."

"For the better?"

"Very much for the better! You were a horrid little brute. You used to terrify me. I never knew when you were going to bound out at me from behind a tree or something. I remember your chasing me for miles,

shrieking at the top of your voice!"

"Sheer embarrassment! I told you just now how I used to worship you. If I shrieked a little, it was merely because I was shy. I did it to hide my devotion."

"You certainly succeeded. I never even suspected it."

Wally sighed.

"How like life! I never told my love, but let concealment like a worm i' the bud...."

"Talking of worms, you once put one down my back!"

"No, no," said Wally in a shocked voice. "Not that I I was boisterous, perhaps, but surely always the gentleman."

"You did! In the shrubbery. There had been a thunderstorm and...."

"I remember the incident now. A mere misunderstanding. I had done with the worm, and thought you might be glad to have it."

"You were always doing things like that. Once you held me over the pond and threatened to drop me into the water--in the winter! Just before Christmas. It was a particularly mean thing to do, because I

couldn't even kick your shins for fear you would let me fall. Luckily Uncle Chris came up and made you stop."

"You considered that a fortunate occurrence, did you?" said Wally.

"Well, perhaps from your point of view it may have been. I saw the thing from a different angle. Your uncle had a whangee with him. My friends sometimes wonder what I mean when I say that my old wound troubles me in frosty weather. By the way, how is your uncle?"

"Oh, he's very well. Just as lazy as ever. He's away at present, down at Brighton."

"He didn't strike me as lazy," said Wally thoughtfully. "Dynamic would express it better. But perhaps I happened to encounter him in a moment of energy. Ah!" The waiter had returned with a loaded tray. "The food! Forgive me if I seem a little distraught for a moment or two. There is man's work before me!"

"And later on, I suppose, you would like a chop or something to take away in your pocket?"

"I will think it over. Possibly a little soup. My needs are very simple these days."

Jill watched him with a growing sense of satisfaction. There was something boyishly engaging about this man. She felt at home with him.

He affected her in much the same way as did Freddie Rooke. He was a definite addition to the things that went to make her happy.

She liked him particularly for being such a good loser. She had always been a good loser herself, and the quality was one which she admired. It was nice of him to dismiss from his conversation--and apparently from his thoughts--that night's fiasco and all that it must have cost him. She wondered how much he had lost. Certainly something very substantial. Yet it seemed to trouble him not at all. Jill considered his behaviour gallant, and her heart warmed to him. This was how a man ought to take the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Wally sighed contentedly, and leaned back in his chair.

"An unpleasant exhibition!" he said apologetically. "But unavoidable. And, anyway, I take it that you prefer to have me well-fed and happy about the place than swooning on the floor with starvation. A wonderful thing, food! I am now ready to converse intelligently on any subject you care to suggest. I have eaten rose-leaves and am no more a golden ass, so to speak. What shall we talk about?"

"Tell me about yourself."

"There is no nobler topic. But what aspect of myself do you wish me to touch on? My thoughts, my tastes, my amusements, my career, or what? I

can talk about myself for hours. My friends in New York often complain about it bitterly."

"New York?" said Jill. "Oh, then you live in America?"

"Yes. I only came over here to see that darned false alarm of a play of mine put on."

"Why didn't you put it on in New York?"

"Too many of the lads of the village know me over there. This was a new departure, you see. What the critics in those parts expect from me is something entitled 'Wow! Wow!' or 'The Girl from Yonkers.' It would have unsettled their minds to find me breaking out in poetic drama. They are men of coarse fibre and ribald mind and they would have been funny about it. I thought it wiser to come over here among strangers, little thinking that I should sit in the next seat to somebody I had known all my life."

"But when did you go to America? And why?"

"I think it must have been four--five--well, quite a number of years after the hose episode. Probably you didn't observe that I wasn't still around, but we crept silently out of the neighbourhood round about that time and went to live in London." His tone lost its lightness momentarily. "My father died, you know, and that sort of

broke things up. He didn't leave any too much money, either. Apparently we had been living on rather too expensive a scale during the time I knew you. At any rate, I was more or less up against it until your father got me a job in an office in New York."

"My father!"

"Yes. It was wonderfully good of him to bother about me. I didn't suppose he would have known me by sight, and, even if he had remembered me, I shouldn't have imagined that the memory would have been a pleasant one. But he couldn't have taken more trouble if I had been a blood-relation."

"That was just like father," said Jill softly.

"He was a prince."

"But you aren't in the office now?"

"No. I found I had a knack of writing verses and things, and I wrote a few vaudeville songs. Then I came across a man named Bevan at a music publisher's. He was just starting to write music, and we got together and turned out some vaudeville sketches, and then a manager sent for us to fix up a show that was dying on the road and we had the good luck to turn it into a success, and after that it was pretty good going. George Bevan got married the other day. Lucky devil!"

"Are you married?"

"No."

"You were faithful to my memory?" said Jill with a smile.

"I was."

"It can't last," said Jill, shaking her head. "One of these days you'll meet some lovely American girl and then you'll put a worm down her back or pull her hair or whatever it is you do when you want to show your devotion, and.... What are you looking at? Is something interesting going on behind me?"

He had been looking past her out into the room.

"It's nothing," he said. "Only there's a statuesque old lady about two tables back of you who has been staring at you, with intervals for refreshment, for the last five minutes. You seem to fascinate her."

"An old lady?"

"Yes. With a glare! She looks like Dunsany's Bird of the Difficult Eye. Count ten and turn carelessly round, There, at that table. Almost behind you."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Jill.

She turned quickly round again.

"What's the matter? Do you know her? Somebody you don't want to meet?"

"It's Lady Underhill! And Derek's with her!"

Wally had been lifting his glass. He put it down rather suddenly.

"Derek?" he said.

"Derek Underhill. The man I'm engaged to marry."

There was a moment's silence.

"Oh!" said Wally thoughtfully. "The man you're engaged to marry? Yes, I see!"

He raised his glass again, and drank its contents quickly.

II

Jill looked at her companion anxiously. Recent events had caused her

completely to forget the existence of Lady Underhill. She was always so intensely interested in what she happened to be doing at the moment that she often suffered these temporary lapses of memory. It occurred to her now--too late, as usual--that the Savoy Hotel was the last place in London where she should have come to supper with Wally. It was the hotel where Lady Underhill was staying. She frowned. Life had suddenly ceased to be careless and happy, and had become a problem-ridden thing, full of perplexity and misunderstandings.

"What shall I do?"

Wally Mason started at the sound of her voice. He appeared to be deep in thoughts of his own.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What shall I do?"

"I shouldn't be worried."

"Derek will be awfully cross."

Wally's good-humoured mouth tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Why?" he said. "There's nothing wrong in your having supper with an old friend."

"N-no," said Jill doubtfully. "But...."

"Derek Underhill," said Wally reflectively. "Is that Sir Derek Underhill, whose name one's always seeing in the papers?"

"Derek is in the papers a lot. He's an M.P. and all sorts of things."

"Good-looking fellow. Ah, here's the coffee."

"I don't want any, thanks."

"Nonsense. Why spoil your meal because of this? Do you smoke?"

"No, thanks."

"Given it up, eh? Daresay you're wise. Stunts the growth and increases the expenses."

"Given it up?"

"Don't you remember sharing one of your father's cigars with me behind the haystack in the meadow? We cut it in half. I finished my half, but I fancy about three puffs were enough for you. Those were happy days!"

"That one wasn't! Of course I remember it now. I don't suppose I shall

ever forget it."

"The thing was my fault, as usual. I recollect I dared you."

"Yes. I always took a dare."

"Do you still?"

"What do you mean?"

Wally knocked the ash off his cigarette.

"Well," he said slowly, "suppose! were to dare you to get up and walk over to that table and look your fiancé in the eye and say, 'Stop scowling at my back hair! I've a perfect right to be supping with an old friend!'--would you do it?"

"Is he?" said Jill startled.

"Scowling? Can't you feel it on the back of your head?" He drew thoughtfully at his cigarette. "If I were you I should stop that sort of thing at the source. It's a habit that can't be discouraged in a husband too early. Scowling is the civilized man's substitute for wife-beating."

Jill moved uncomfortably in her chair. Her quick temper resented his

tone. There was a hostility, a hardly veiled contempt in his voice which stung her. Derek was sacred. Whoever criticised him, presumed. Wally, a few minutes before a friend and an agreeable companion, seemed to her to have changed. He was once more the boy whom she had disliked in the old days. There was a gleam in her eyes which should have warned him, but he went on.

"I should imagine that this Derek of yours is not one of our leading sunbeams. Well, I suppose he could hardly be, if that's his mother and there is anything in heredity."

"Please don't criticise Derek," said Jill coldly.

"I was only saying...."

"Never mind. I don't like it."

A slow flush crept over Wally's face. He made no reply, and there fell between them a silence that was like a shadow, Jill sipped her coffee miserably. She was regretting that little spurt of temper. She wished she could have recalled the words. Not that it was the actual words that had torn asunder this gossamer thing, the friendship which they had begun to weave like some fragile web: it was her manner, the manner of the princess rebuking an underling. She knew that, if she had struck him, she could not have offended Wally more deeply. There are some men whose ebullient natures enable them to rise unscathed

from the worst snub. Wally, her intuition told her, was not that kind of man.

There was only one way of mending the matter. In these clashes of human temperaments, these sudden storms that spring up out of a clear sky, it is possible sometimes to repair the damage, if the psychological moment is resolutely seized, by talking rapidly and with detachment on neutral topics. Words have made the rift, and words alone can bridge it. But neither Jill nor her companion could find words, and the silence lengthened grimly. When Wally spoke, it was in the level tones of a polite stranger.

"Your friends have gone."

His voice was the voice in which, when she went on railway journeys, fellow-travellers in the carriage enquired of Jill if she would prefer the window up or down. It had the effect of killing her regrets and feeding her resentment. She was a girl who never refused a challenge, and she set herself to be as frigidly polite and aloof as he.

"Really?" she said. "When did they leave?"

"A moment ago." The lights gave the warning flicker that announces the arrival of the hour of closing. In the momentary darkness they both rose. Wally scrawled his name across the bill which the waiter had insinuated upon his attention. "I suppose we had better be moving?"

They crossed the room in silence. Everybody was moving in the same direction. The broad stairway leading to the lobby was crowded with chattering supper-parties. The light had gone up again.

At the cloak-room Wally stopped.

"I see Underhill waiting up there," he said casually. "To take you home, I suppose. Shall we say good-night? I'm staying in the hotel."

Jill glanced towards the head of the stairs. Derek was there. He was alone. Lady Underhill presumably had gone up to her room in the elevator.

Wally was holding out his hand. His face was stolid and his eyes avoided hers.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye," said Jill.

She felt curiously embarrassed. At this last moment hostility had weakened, and she was conscious of a desire to make amends. She and this man had been through much together that night, much that was perilous and much that was pleasant. A sudden feeling of remorse came over her.

"You'll come and see us, won't you?" she said a little wistfully. "I'm sure my uncle would like to meet you again."

"It's very good of you," said Wally, "but I'm afraid I shall be going back to America at any moment now."

Pique, that ally of the devil, regained its slipping grip upon Jill.

"Oh? I'm sorry," she said indifferently. "Well, good-bye, then."

"Good-bye."

"I hope you have a pleasant voyage."

"Thanks."

He turned into the cloak-room, and Jill went up the stairs to join Derek. She felt angry and depressed, full of a sense of the futility of things. People flashed into one's life and out again. Where was the sense of it?

III

Derek had been scowling, and Derek still scowled. His eyebrows were

formidable, and his mouth smiled no welcome at Jill as she approached him. The evening, portions of which Jill had found so enjoyable, had contained no pleasant portions for Derek. Looking back over a lifetime whose events had been almost uniformly agreeable, he told himself that he could not recall another day which had gone so completely awry. It had started with the fog. He hated fog. Then had come that meeting with his mother at Charing Cross, which had been enough to upset him by itself. After that, rising to a crescendo of unpleasantness, the day had provided that appalling situation at the Albany, the recollection of which still made him tingle; and there had followed the silent dinner, the boredom of the early part of the play, the fire at the theatre, the undignified scramble for the exits, and now this discovery of the girl whom he was engaged to marry supping at the Savoy with a fellow he didn't remember ever having seen in his life. All these things combined to induce in Derek a mood bordering on ferocity. His birth and income combining to make him one of the spoiled children of the world, had fitted him ill for such a series of catastrophes. He received Jill with frozen silence and led her out to the waiting taxi-cab. It was only when the cab had started on its journey that he found relief in speech.

"Well," he said, mastering with difficulty an inclination to raise his voice to a shout, "perhaps you will kindly explain?"

Jill had sunk back against the cushions of the cab. The touch of his body against hers always gave her a thrill, half pleasurable, half

frightening. She had never met anybody who affected her in this way as Derek did. She moved a little closer, and felt for his hand. But, as she touched it, it retreated--coldly. Her heart sank. It was like being cut in public by somebody very dignified.

"Derek, darling!" Her lips trembled. Others had seen this side of Derek Underhill frequently, for he was a man who believed in keeping the world in its place, but she never. To her he had always been the perfect, gracious knight. A little too perfect, perhaps, a trifle too gracious, possibly, but she had been too deeply in love to notice that. "Don't be cross!"

The English language is the richest in the world, and yet somehow in moments when words count most we generally choose the wrong ones. The adjective "cross" as a description of his Jove-like wrath that consumed his whole being jarred upon Derek profoundly. It was as though Prometheus, with the vultures tearing his liver, had been asked if he were piqued.

"Cross!"

The cab rolled on. Lights from lamp-posts flashed in at windows. It was a pale, anxious little face that they lit up when they shone upon Jill.

"I can't understand you," said Derek at last. Jill noticed that he had

not yet addressed her by her name. He was speaking straight out in front of him as if he were soliloquising. "I simply cannot understand you. After what happened before dinner to-night, for you to cap everything by going off alone to supper at a restaurant, where half the people in the room must have known you, with a man...."

"You don't understand!"

"Exactly! I said I did not understand." The feeling of having scored a point made Derek feel a little better. "I admit it. Your behaviour is incomprehensible. Where did you meet this fellow?"

"I met him at the theatre. He was the author of the play."

"The man you told me you had been talking to? The fellow who scraped acquaintance with you between the acts?"

"But I found out he was an old friend. I mean, I knew him when I was a child."

"You didn't tell me that."

"I only found it out later."

"After he had invited you to supper! It's maddening!" cried Derek, the sense of his wrongs surging back over him. "What do you suppose my

mother thought? She asked me who the man with you was. I had to say I didn't know! What do you suppose she thought?"

It is to be doubted whether anything else in the world could have restored the fighting spirit to Jill's cowering soul at that moment; but the reference to Lady Underhill achieved this miracle. That deep mutual antipathy which is so much more common than love at first sight had sprung up between the two at the instant of their meeting. The circumstances of that meeting had caused it to take root and grow. To Jill, Derek's mother was by this time not so much a fellow human being whom she disliked as a something, a sort of force, that made for her unhappiness. She was a menace and a loathing.

"If your mother had asked me that question," she retorted with spirit, "I should have told her that he was the man who got me safely out of the theatre after you...." She checked herself. She did not want to say the unforgivable thing. "You see," she said more quietly, "you had disappeared...."

"My mother is an old woman," said Derek stiffly. "Naturally I had to look after her. I called to you to follow."

"Oh, I understand. I'm simply trying to explain what happened. I was there all alone, and Wally Mason...."

"Wally!" Derek uttered a short laugh, almost a bark. "It got to

Christian names, eh?"

Jill set her teeth.

"I told you I knew him as a child. I always called him Wally then."

"I beg your pardon. I had forgotten."

"He got me out through the pass-door on to the stage and through the stage-door."

Derek was feeling cheated. He had the uncomfortable sensation that comes to men who grandly contemplate mountains and see them dwindle to molehills. The apparently outrageous had shown itself in explanation nothing so out-of-the-way after all. He seized upon the single point in Jill's behaviour that still constituted a grievance.

"There was no need for you to go to supper with the man!" Jove-like wrath had ebbed away to something deplorably like a querulous grumble.

"You should have gone straight home. You must have known how anxious I would be about you."

"Well, really, Derek, dear! You didn't seem so very anxious! You were having supper yourself quite cosily."

The human mind is curiously constituted. It is worthy of record that,

despite his mother's obvious disapproval of his engagement, despite all the occurrences of this dreadful day, it was not till she made this remark that Derek Underhill first admitted to himself that, intoxicate his senses as she might, there was a possibility that Jill Mariner was not the ideal wife for him. The idea came and went more quickly than breath upon a mirror. It passed, but it had been. There are men who fear repartee in a wife more keenly than a sword. Derek was one of these. Like most men of single outlook, whose dignity is their most precious possession, he winced from an edged tongue.

"My mother was greatly upset," he replied coldly. "I thought a cup of soup would do her good. And, as for being anxious about you, I telephoned to your home to ask if you had come in."

"And when," thought Jill, "they told you I hadn't, you went off to supper!"

She did not speak the words. If she had an edged tongue, she had also the control of it. She had no wish to wound Derek. Whole-hearted in everything she did, she loved him with her whole heart. There might be specks upon her idol--that its feet might be clay she could never believe--but they mattered nothing. She loved him.

"I'm so sorry, dear," she said. "So awfully sorry! I've been a bad girl, haven't I?"

She felt for his hand again, and this time he allowed it to remain stiffly in her grasp. It was like being grudgingly recognized by somebody very dignified who had his doubts about you but reserved judgment.

The cab drew up at the door of the house in Ovingdon Square which Jill's Uncle Christopher had settled upon as a suitable address for a gentleman of his standing. Jill put up her face to be kissed, like a penitent child.

"I'll never be naughty again!"

For a flickering instant Derek hesitated. The drive, long as it was, had been too short wholly to restore his equanimity. Then the sense of her nearness, her sweetness, the faint perfume of her hair, and her eyes, shining softly in the darkness so close to his own, overcame him. He crushed her to him.

Jill disappeared into the house with a happy laugh. It had been a terrible day, but it had ended well.

"The Albany," said Derek to the cabman.

He leaned back against the cushions. His senses were in a whirl. The cab rolled on. Presently his exalted mood vanished as quickly as it had come. Jill absent always affected him differently from Jill

present. He was not a man of strong imagination, and the stimulus of her waned when she was not with him. Long before the cab reached the Albany the frown was back on his face.

IV

Arriving at the Albany, he found Freddie Rooke lying on his spine in a deep arm-chair. His slippers were on the mantelpiece, and he was restoring his wasted tissues with a strong whisky-and-soda. One of the cigars which Barker, the valet, had stamped with the seal of his approval was in the corner of his mouth. The Sporting Times, with a perusal of which he had been soothing his fluttered nerves, had fallen on the floor beside the chair. He had finished reading, and was now gazing peacefully at the ceiling, his mind a perfect blank. There was nothing the matter with Freddie.

"Hullo, old thing," he observed as Derek entered. "So you buzzed out of the fiery furnace all right? I was wondering how you had got along. How are you feeling? I'm not the man I was! These things get the old system all stirred up! I'll do anything in reason to oblige and help things along and all that, but to be called on at a moment's notice to play Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego rolled into one, without rehearsal or make-up, is a bit too thick! No, young feller-me-lad! If theatre fires are going to be the fashion this season, the Last of the Rookes will sit quietly at home and play solitaire. Mix yourself a

drink of something, old man, or something of that kind. By the way, your jolly old mater. All right? Not even singed? Fine! Make a long arm and gather in a cigar."

And Freddie, having exerted himself to play the host in a suitable manner, wedged himself more firmly into his chair and blew a cloud of smoke.

Derek sat down. He lit a cigar, and stared silently at the fire. From the mantelpiece Jill's photograph smiled down, but he did not look at it. Presently his attitude began to weigh upon Freddie. Freddie had had a trying evening. What he wanted just now was merry prattle, and his friend did not seem disposed to contribute his share. He removed his feet from the mantelpiece and wriggled himself sideways, so that he could see Derek's face. Its gloom touched him. Apart from his admiration for Derek, he was a warmhearted young man, and sympathized with affliction when it presented itself for his notice.

"Something on your mind, old bean?" he enquired delicately.

Derek did not answer for a moment. Then he reflected that, little as he esteemed the other's mentality, he and Freddie had known each other a long time, and that it would be a relief to confide in some one. And Freddie, moreover, was an old friend of Jill and the man who had introduced him to her.

"Yes," he said.

"I'm listening, old top," said Freddie. "Release the film."

Derek drew at his cigar, and watched the smoke as it curled to the ceiling.

"It's about Jill."

Freddie signified his interest by wriggling still further sideways.

"Jill, eh?"

"Freddie, she's so damned impulsive!"

Freddie nearly rolled out of his chair. This, he took it, was what writing-chappies called a coincidence.

"Rummy you should say that," he ejaculated. "I was telling her exactly the same thing myself only this evening." He hesitated. "I fancy I can see what you're driving at, old thing. The watchword is 'What ho, the mater!' yes, no? You've begun to get a sort of idea that if Jill doesn't watch her step, she's apt to sink pretty low in the betting, what? I know exactly what you mean! You and I know all right that Jill's a topper. But one can see that to your mater she might seem a bit different. I mean to say, your jolly old mater only judging by

first impressions, and the meeting not having come off quite as scheduled.... I say, old man," he broke off, "fearfully sorry and all that about that business. You know what I mean! Wouldn't have had it happen for the world. I take it the mater was a trifle peeved? Not to say perturbed and chagrined? I seemed to notice it at dinner."

"She was furious, of course. She did not refer to the matter when we were alone together, but there was no need to. I knew what she was thinking."

Derek threw away his cigar. Freddie noted this evidence of an overwrought soul with concern.

"The whole thing," he conceded, "was a bit unfortunate."

Derek began to pace the room.

"Freddie."

"On the spot, old man."

"Something's got to be done."

"Absolutely!" Freddie nodded solemnly. He had taken this matter greatly to heart. Derek was his best friend, and he had always been extremely fond of Jill. It hurt him to see things going wrong. "I'll

tell you what, old bean. Let me handle this binge for you."

"You?"

"Me! The Final Rooke!" He jumped up, and leaned against the mantelpiece. "I'm the lad to do it. I've known Jill for years. She'll listen to me. I'll talk to her like a Dutch uncle and make her understand the general scheme of things. I'll take her out to tea to-morrow and slang her in no uncertain voice! Leave the whole thing to me, laddie!"

Derek considered.

"It might do some good," he said.

"Good?" said Freddie. "It's it, dear boy! It's a wheeze! You toddle off to bed and have a good sleep. I'll fix the whole thing for you!"